Artwork by D. S. Causey

THESE THREE ARE ONE

THE TRINITY VS. ONENESS

Refuting Modalism

By Afshin Yaghtin

The orthodox understanding of the Trinity has again been under attack, with a resurgence of Oneness doctrine infiltrating even Baptist and non-denominational circles. But this is not the first time that the fundamental view of the holy and blessed Trinity has come under fire.

Modalism and *Sabellianism* of the 3rd century also denied the plurality of the Godhead, while still affirming the deity of Jesus Christ.

Modalists believe that God is One God who *manifests* or appears in different "modes" or "forms" at different times, either as the Father, the Son or the Holy

"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" (1 John 5:7).

Spirit. As such, Modalists make the assertion that Jesus is not only the Son of God, but that He is also the Father and the Spirit. The Father, therefore, is Jesus; the Son is, therefore, Jesus; the Spirit is, therefore, Jesus. Jesus is the One True God.

Sounds good in many ways, *but completely unbiblical.*

Trinitarian theology asserts that Jesus is not—in any way, shape, or form—the Father or the Spirit, but that Jesus is exclusively the Eternal Son of God. The Trinitarian can affirm that Jesus is the Son; but he cannot rightly say that Jesus is the Father or the Holy Spirit. Jesus alone is the only begotten Son of God, incarnate in the flesh, born of a virgin, crucified, buried and risen.

SINGULARITY

"We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence."[1]

Modalists and Oneness believers inevitably hold to *patripassionism*, "the teaching that God the Father suffered on the cross with (or as) the Son".[2] But Jesus alone died for us on the Cross, not the Father or the Spirit. Jesus alone was buried and resurrected, not the Holy Spirit or the Father. The Spirit *raised* Jesus from the dead; the Father *sent* Jesus to die for us. But it was Jesus and Jesus alone, the eternal Son of God, who made atonement for us at Calvary's cross. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son …"* (John 3:16).

Perhaps this doesn't seem like a big deal at first—as though we are splitting hairs. But the question of Oneness vs. Trinitarianism cuts to the very nature of God. Is God triune in nature or singular? Trinitarians believe God is three personal, distinct entities or "persons" (for lack of a better term) who exist co-equally, co-eternally and co-substantially—*in their essence and substance*—as the One True God; Modalists claim God is 1 entity or "Person" who manifests in three different shapes, forms or modes.

1 John 5:7, the most direct verse on the nature of the Trinity says: "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."[3]

Whereas Modalists interpret "one" quantitatively (3 = 1), Trinitarians understand "one" *qualitatively* (3 = one), in reference to God's traits and attributes and the intrinsic, unbroken unity between the three Persons of the Godhead. But it is much more than that. Not only are the three Persons of the Godhead perfectly united in spirit, heart, mind and will, but they are of the same one essence and substance, *as they move and have their being in one another.*

In other words, they are so close and tightly knit together, they exist *in* one another. Jesus prayed for His body, the church in John 17:21: *"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us …"*

Jesus' prayers reveals that God the Father literally dwells *in* him; and He literally dwells *in* God the Father. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit co-exist inside one another's being, both of one and the same eternal substance and essence, along with the Holy Spirit. But, at the same time, they exist and function distinctly and individually, each with His own mind, heart, emotion and will—each submitted one to another, without variation.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John: *"If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true" (5:31-32).* According to Old Testament Law—which Jesus had to fulfill in its entirety to qualify as the Messiah—every matter had to be legally established by two or more witnesses.[4] In order for Jesus to be the Messiah, He could not be the only one witnessing of Himself. As the Son of God incarnate, He was one witness. But there had to be another.

PLURALITY

"So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; And yet they are not three Gods, but one God."

There are not three Gods, but One God. The *Shema Yisrael* revealed this, in the Old Testament: *"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:" (Deuteronomy 6:4).* The *Shema Yisreal ("Hear, O Israel")* was recited by every Jewish boy and girl in ancient Israel from the time they could speak. But one thing that many Jews did not yet comprehend—because it was hidden in types and foreshadows and revealed to the prophets—was that even in the *Shema*, the Trinity was being declared.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD ***[JHVH]*** *our God* ***[Elohim]*** *is one Lord* ***[JHVH]****.*

The LORD ***[1]*** *our God* ***[2]*** *is one Lord* ***[3]****.*[5]

There were hints and foreshadows of the triune nature of God in the Old Testament, even as early as the *first chapter* of the first book of the Bible: *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness …" (Genesis 1:26).*

Who was God speaking to when He referred to Himself in the plural? The only viable answer is *The Father, the Son* and *the Holy Ghost.*

Confronted, the Modalist has no alternative but to claim that God was not referring to Himself in the plural, but was speaking to the heavenly host (the angels). This is gross and obvious error, since God made man in *His own image*, and not in the image of angels. In fact, it is outright blasphemy to attribute God's creative work to anyone but Himself. God said, "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another …" (Isaiah 42:8).

God refers to Himself directly in the plural a total of three times in Genesis alone—in creation: "*Let us make man in our image"*, after the Fall: *"And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil …"* and at the Tower of Babel: "Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language …"[6]

The three Persons of the Godhead are even present during the first moments of Creation. In Genesis 1:2: "… the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters", as God the Father spoke the world into existence through His eternal Word: "*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible …" (Colossians 1:16).*

GOD IS PERSONAL

"Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other."

God is a personal God. By attacking the triunity of the Godhead, anti-Trinitarian doctrine attacks the personal, eternal relationship that exists between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Spirit and the Spirit and the Father.

When Jesus was praying to His Father in the *Garden of Gethsemane: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39),* Jesus was not praying to Himself *in another form,* He was praying to His Father in Heaven. Jesus' prayer also reveals that He has a distinct will, separate from His Father's; albeit, as God, He submitted His will entirely to His Father, because total, uninterrupted unity exists within the Godhead. If Jesus was openly talking and praying to another form of Himself, this would make God *schizophrenic.*

Jesus prayed often to His Father: "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). In this verse, we witness two separate Persons present *before the world was.*

Jesus' prayer in John 17, sometimes referred to as *Jesus' Farewell Prayer*—the longest of Jesus' prayers in the Bible—defines what the Bible means of God, when it says, *these three are one.* Jesus prays for the individual members of His body, the church: "… Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are." Using this definition of "one" and allowing the Bible to define itself, Jesus prays for total and complete *unity* within the individual members of His own body. Yet we, the individual *lively stones* of his church are not one person, but many. We do not lose our individuality in Christ. In the same way, The Father, Son and Spirit are one (in essence, substance, will and purpose), without losing their separate and individual sense of being.

With no rebuttal at their disposal, the Modalist accuses Trinitarians of being polytheistic, but that is a cheap shot, since Trinitarian theology clearly affirms, with the *Shema: "… The LORD our God is one LORD:"*

The Bible declares: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). A husband and wife obviously do not become one literal person at marriage; my wife and I are not the same person, although we live as one. Becoming *one flesh* speaks of the foundation and unity of a newly consummated marriage and our ability to procreate as one—and form one, new family.

"ONENESS" ARGUMENTS

"God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting."

The most formidable Bible verse that Trinity deniers have is Isaiah 9:6, a prophecy about the coming Messiah:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

The claim is that the Messiah is called, "The everlasting Father". However, it is only formidable on the surface. This prophecy is speaking of Jesus' attributes as God in the flesh. Isaiah 9:6 does not say that Jesus *is* the everlasting Father, but that *His name shall be called.* And that's exactly what Jesus means, "Jehovah Saves". This is akin to when Isaiah also said that Jesus' name shall be called *Emmanuel*. Emmanuel means, "God with us". It is a proclamation of Jesus' deity. Isaiah 9:6 is no different.

In fact, the strongest verse for Oneness error is yet another vindication of the Trinity. Notice that Isaiah also alludes to the *Comforter (*a reference to the Holy Spirit), the *Prince of Peace* (a reference

to the Son) and the "everlasting Father" (a reference to God the Father).

Another passage Modalists point to is the moment Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father; Jesus rebuffs him: *"… Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?"* (John 14:9). *"See, Jesus is the Father!"* says the Modalist. But Jesus' answer, as is often the case, becomes clear as you keep reading: *"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake."*

The Father is *in* Jesus. And Jesus is *in* the Father. This, again, speaks of their total and complete triunity.

JESUS ONLY BAPTISM

"One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person."

Modalism is a conflation of the Persons of the Godhead. This is why Oneness Pentecostals or other Oneness groups perform *Jesus Name Only* baptisms, where they deliberately *do not* recite: "… in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit …", but baptize instead *in the name of Jesus.*

This stemmed from a 1913 Pentecostal California camp meeting, called *The Jesus Only Movement,* when a man named John G. Scheppe, had a "vision" which led him to believe that the historic, Trinitarian method of baptizing was wrong. "At an April 1913 camp meeting in Arroyo Seco, California, an evangelist named R. E. McAlister remarked in the course of a sermon that 'the apostles invariably baptized their converts once in the name of Jesus.' That night, a preacher named John G. Scheppe received, so he thought, 'a glimpse of the power of the name of Jesus.' The next morning, he shared this vision with others, and many Pentecostal believers who had been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were rebaptized in the name of Jesus only. So began what came to be known as the 'New Issue,' 'Jesus Only,' or 'Oneness' Pentecostalism."[7]

The next logical step followed, which was to deny the Trinity in its entirety, adding the claim that the Trinity is a left over teaching from the Roman Catholic Church of Constantine.

We, however, base our views on Scripture, not visions.

ON THE RIGHT HAND

"Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead; He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;"

Oneness is really the same, old heresy of ancient Modalism. It is very serious error that does not necessarily negate a believer's salvation, since they don't deny the deity of Jesus Christ. But one has to wonder if the Oneness believer is worshiping the Same God of the Bible.

It should at least raise a serious red flag.

The God of the Bible is the One who Paul the apostle begins and ends his epistles with: *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen" (2 Corinthians 13:14).* And it is the Son who is magnified in Hebrews 1:3: "*Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;"*

If Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father, then He is *not* God the Father, but separate and distinct from Him—equal in every way, fully God in His own right—but the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

While equal in every way, a hierarchal order exists within the Godhead. *"For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:27-28).*

Today, *Oneness* is not restricted to the Oneness Pentecostals that split the Assemblies of God church in 1913. Through dissemination of information via the internet and social media, Oneness teaching has infiltrated traditional Christian believers, and even some non-denominational and Baptist churches. I have friends who have fallen to Modalism. But, by God's grace, I'll continue to affirm with the Bible and benedictions from men like the apostle Paul, *"Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love" (2 John 1:3).* ■

1 All quotes in this section are from the Athanasian Creed.
2 https://www.gotquestions.org/Modalistic-Monarchianism.html
3 Modern Bible versions severely truncate 1 John 5:7, see Issue 2, KJV Corner: The Trinity.
4 Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:16, 2 Corinthians 13:1
5 I credit Luis Perez for this typological gem.
6 Genesis 1:26, Genesis 3:22, Genesis 11:7
7 "Statement of Fundamental Truths Centennial", George O. Wood, https://news.ag.org/en/Features/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths-Centennial"